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Australia's Public Broadcaster Partners With Trusted News Initiative to 'Protect Public' From 'Misinformation'

During the pandemic, the Trusted News Initiative promised to prevent "the spread of harmful vaccine disinformation" and "the growing number of conspiracy theories," targeting online memes that featured anti-vaccine messaging or posts that downplayed the risk of COVID-19.

By **Maryanne Demasi, Ph.D.**

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Editor's note: *Children's Health Defense in June 2023 sued members of the Trusted News Initiative alleging it violated antitrust laws and the U.S. Constitution when the major news corporation members collectively colluded with tech giants to censor online news.*

Australia's public broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), proudly announced in 2022 that it had partnered with the Trusted News Initiative (TNI), an international alliance of major news corporations and Big Tech firms, to counter the growing threat of "fake news."

It was part of sweeping reforms in the media to deliver "trusted" news to global audiences and protect the public from the harms of misinformation and disinformation online.

Spearheaded by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), partners include Reuters, Associated Press, Financial Times, The Washington Post and ABC Australia, along with social media and tech giants — Meta (Facebook/Instagram), Microsoft (LinkedIn) and Google (YouTube) to name a few.

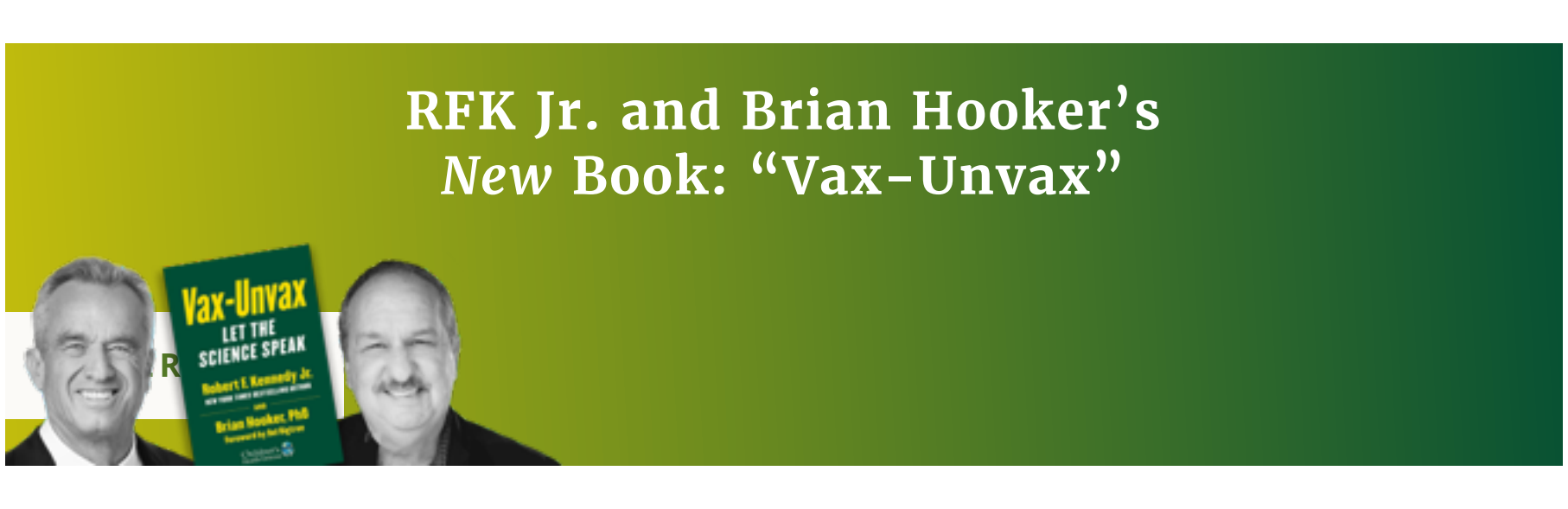
When ABC announced its new alliance with TNI, Justin Stevens, ABC news director said, "We're pleased to join the Trusted News Initiative and, in the process, provide Australian audiences with a deeper and better-informed view of our region and the world."

During the pandemic, the alliance promised to focus on preventing "the spread of harmful vaccine disinformation," and "the growing number of conspiracy theories," targeting online memes that featured anti-vaccine messaging or posts that downplayed the risk of COVID-19.

However, critics have grown increasingly uneasy about the alliance.

They say governments are being protected by journalists, instead of being held to account for their pandemic policies and they're concerned the alliance has shaped public discourse by controlling people's access to information and censoring content that diverges from the status quo.

RFK Jr. and Brian Hooker's
New Book: "Vax-Unvax"



Weaponizing fact-checking

Deploying fact-checkers is one way that TNI members control the dissemination of public information. When they label a statement "false," "wrong," or "misleading," it's used by social media platforms to legitimize the censorship of that content by deprioritizing, hiding, demonetizing or suppressing it.

Debunking content is time-consuming and costly. Fact-checkers are invariably junior journalists or intern researchers, with little to no understanding of complex scientific issues or public health policies, and often appeal to governments for the "truth."

When the authors of the Great Barrington Declaration opposed government-enforced lockdowns, fact-checkers ran hit pieces on the authors — the notable academics were then shadow-banned, censored and deplatformed from social media.

In the case of the ABC, its original in-house fact-checking unit was axed in 2016 because of Federal budget cuts but was revamped the following year when the ABC teamed up with RMIT University in Melbourne to form the RMIT ABC Fact Check and RMIT FactLab departments.

The ABC paid more than $670,000 to RMIT between 2020 — 2023 as part of its joint fact-checking venture but they quickly gained a reputation for being flawed.

For example, concerns about the suppression of the lab leak theory were labeled as "false" even though they were true.

ABC's fact-checkers were also accused of being biased by SkyNews because they had used their influence to censor disfavoured political views in the Voice to Parliament referendum.

Queensland Senator Gerard Rennick grilled ABC's Managing Director David Anderson at a Senate Estimates hearing about the network's dodgy fact-checking practices last year.

"Who is fact-checking the fact-checkers?" asked Rennick.

"You've made some outrageous claims on these fact-checks that aren't correct, and you haven't actually backed them up with any facts," added Rennick, accusing the ABC of bias for predominantly fact-checking politically conservative voices in the media.

Sources say these controversies have prompted the ABC to cut ties with RMIT whose contract ends in June.

New fact-checkers, same problems?

An ABC spokesperson said the network is now building its own internal fact-checking team, called "ABC NEWS Verify," which appears to have similarities to the "BBC Verify" initiative.

"ABC NEWS Verify will be our center of excellence for scrutinizing and verifying information in online communities," said the spokesperson outlining the various tasks of fact-checkers. "Establishing a dedicated team will enhance and focus our efforts, creating a hub for verification best practice."

I asked ABC if it had any internal policy document outlining the criteria its fact-checkers would use to deem content as "misinformation" or "disinformation" but the spokesperson responded by saying "No, it doesn't."

Andrew Lowenthal, an expert in digital rights and a Twitter Files journalist, said the ABC's failure to explain how it intends on fact-checking claims was "seriously ridiculous."

"That the ABC is seeking to decide what is misinformation without laying out any criteria demonstrates just how farcical and political 'fact-checking' has become," said Lowenthal.

"Without transparent and publicly available criteria the program will quickly turn into a partisan advocacy initiative," he added.

"The Wuhan Cover-Up"
by Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

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Lowenthal's Twitter Files investigation confirmed the Australian government was monitoring COVID-19-related speech of its citizens and requesting that posts be flagged and censored if they deemed them to be misinformation.

"In that investigation, the government's Department of Home Affairs was relying on Yahoo! News and USA Today, among others, to justify their take down requests or they'd hire journalists without scientific credentials. We need dialogue, not diktats, to determine what is true," said Lowenthal

Rennick agreed, saying the ABC's process lacks transparency. "Who are these people that claim to be the fact-checkers in the first place and what are their credentials? Sounds to me like it's a black box," said Rennick.

"Often when fact-checkers come out with their reports, they don't give the other person they're fact-checking, a right-of-reply. Also, they rarely disclose the conflicts of interest of the so-called 'experts' they use to fact-check claims," he added.

Michael Shellenberger, author, journalist and founder of Public, has written extensively on the "censorship industrial complex."

"That's what the trusted news initiative [TNI] was all about … a strategy to use fact-checking initiatives to demand censorship by social media platforms," said Shellenberger.

"They can pretend that's not what it's about, but the fact that the news media are participating in this, is grotesque. It's a complete destruction of whatever reputation and integrity they used to have," he added.

"Organisations like BBC and ABC … they used to have reputations for independence and integrity, but they've now decided to destroy their entire reputation on the mantle of them being the deciders of the truth. The Central Committee. That's totalitarianism that's not free speech."

The ABC says its new ABC NEWS Verify will have no connection to TNI.

Impartiality and credibility?

TNI's broad principles of working in lockstep towards a single narrative have meant that legacy media operate largely as a mouthpiece for government propaganda, offering little critique of public health policies … and ABC has been no exception.

During the pandemic, the broadcaster repeatedly came under fire after its medical commentator Dr. Norman Swan made countless calls for harsher lockdowns, mask mandates and COVID-19 boosters — policies that strongly aligned with the government but had little scientific backing.

Swan's commentary rarely provided an impartial perspective and he was eventually called out for failing to publicly disclose his financial interest in seeking government contracts related to COVID-19.

In addition, Ita Buttrose, who was ABC chair until last month, was seen fronting Pfizer's advertising campaigns for COVID-19 products. ABC defended Buttrose saying, "Given she was not involved in editorial decisions, there was no conflict of interest."

The ABC denies its alliance with TNI has impacted its editorial independence but Shellenberger says the entire purpose of joining TNI is to ensure they become the single source of truth.

"They've stopped doing real reporting, and they're just out there wanting to be paid to regurgitate and act like publicists for the government. It's grotesque. It's not journalism, it's propaganda," said Shellenberger.

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Resisting the tyranny

Some journalists have been resisting what they perceive to be "tyranny" in legacy media and the widespread suppression of free speech.

In June 2021, a group of around 30 journalists rallied together to denounce TNI's "censorship and fearmongering" and accused the alliance of subjecting the public to a distorted view of the truth.

The group known as Holding the Line: Journalists Against Covid Censorship shared concerns that reporters were being reprimanded by their superiors and freelancers were being blacklisted from jobs for not following the "one official narrative."

Presidential hopeful Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has filed a lawsuit against TNI alleging that legacy media organizations and Big Tech have worked to "collectively censor online news" about COVID-19 and the 2020 presidential election.

The lawsuit states:

> "By their own admission, members of the 'Trusted News Initiative' ('TNI') have agreed to work together, and have in fact worked together, to exclude from the world's dominant Internet platforms rival news publishers who engage in reporting that challenges and competes with TNI members' reporting on certain issues relating to COVID-19 and U.S. politics."

A group of 138 scholars, public intellectuals, and journalists from across the political spectrum have since published The Westminster Declaration.

In essence, it's a free speech manifesto urging governments to dismantle the "censorship industrial complex" which has seen government agencies and Big Tech companies work together to censor free speech.

In Australia, the journalist's union Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance, or MEAA, has called on ABC's newly appointed Chair Kim Williams to "restore the reputation of the national broadcaster by addressing concerns about the impact of external pressures on editorial decision making."

Williams, who took over from Buttrose last month, has warned his journalists that "activism" is not welcome at ABC and that if they fail to observe impartiality guidelines, they should consider leaving the network.

Will the ABC course correct with Williams at the helm? Now that trust in legacy media is at historical lows, the ABC's partnership with TNI does little to assuage fears that the network has passed the point of no return.

Originally published on Maryanne Demasi's Reports Substack page.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of Children's Health Defense.

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